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# Shooting Is Latest Eruption in a Grim Ritual of Rage and Blame

By ALEXANDER BURNS JUNE 14, 2017

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The scene around Eugene Simpson Stadium Park in Alexandria, Va., on Wednesday after a gunman shot four people, including Representative Steve Scalise. Al Drago/The New York Times

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The violence has come regularly for years, in one politically charged spasm after another. A member of Congress shot through the head in Tucson. Assaults on the Holocaust Museum, a [Planned Parenthood office](#) and the Family Research Council, a socially conservative group. Gunmen targeting black churchgoers in South Carolina, [Indian immigrants in Kansas](#) and police officers in New York and Texas.

The [attempted slaughter](#) of Republican lawmakers on a baseball diamond outside Washington was less an aberration than the latest example of a grim trend, widely remarked upon by leaders in both parties, but never slowed or stopped.

And with lawmakers, legislative aides and Capitol police officers hospitalized on Wednesday, a process of mourning and recrimination unfolded as a kind of familiar ritual, with a somber statement from the president and bipartisan denunciations of violence quickly giving way to finger-pointing and blame on social media.

Even high-level gestures of conciliation, including from President Trump and Senator Bernie Sanders, did little to blunt the sense that America's civic culture is consumed with anger and breaking down — though mental illness sometimes makes it impossible to say exactly what leads to violence.

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To survivors of past attacks, the shooting in Virginia — perpetrated by a [66-year-old former Sanders supporter](#) who expressed rage over Mr. Trump's presidency — came as a sign that the worst might still be ahead.

Former Senator John C. Danforth, Republican of Missouri, said the violence reflected a contagion in America's political culture, in which adversaries were treated as "people to be destroyed." He said Mr. Trump and Democratic leaders, as well as the news media, all deserved blame.

"We are inundated by rage," Mr. Danforth, who is an ordained minister, said in an interview. "It's not just practicing politicians. It's the demand from the base of the two parties, and it is in large part encouraged by the media."

Mr. Danforth, 80, issued a searing rebuke to his own party in 2015, after the suicide of a state officeholder, [Thomas Schweich](#), who had been the target of brutal personal attacks. In a eulogy Mr. Danforth warned, "Words can kill." But he acknowledged ruefully on Wednesday that practitioners of that brand of politics seldom paid a price for it.

"It apparently works," he said. "It wins elections, wins ratings."

Ron Barber, a former aide to Representative Gabrielle Giffords who was wounded in the 2011 shooting that nearly killed her, and then briefly [replaced her in Congress](#), said Wednesday's attack brought back "terrible memories" for him. After his own election in 2012, Mr. Barber recalled, people left messages at his office threatening to punch or kill him.

"Fast-forward to 2017, and I'm sorry to say, it gets worse," said Mr. Barber, a Democrat. "What happened in 2016 was a presidential campaign that I think really ramped up the anger and vulgarities that we see directed at members of Congress."

That toxicity does not emanate only from politicians, Mr. Barber said. "I am on Facebook and I see things there that I couldn't imagine anyone saying about another person," he said. "We've seen an increase in racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia. It's time for all our leaders, from the president on down, to say, 'Stop.'"

Voters on the left and the right described themselves as shaken and fearful of what might happen next. Among conservatives, the shooting appeared to confirm a belief that liberal opposition to Mr. Trump had taken a sinister turn, veering into outright violence. For liberals, the attack stirred concern about the potential for extremism on the left, and deepened a sense — dating from Barack Obama's presidency — that ordinary partisan conflicts had taken on more menacing overtones.

In Fairhope, Ala., B. J. Middleton, a retired police officer, said the explosive political atmosphere recalled the time of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968. Mr. Middleton, 78, who supports Mr. Trump, said he increasingly feared "violence coming from the left."

"I was there for the riots and what happened to Dr. King, and I'll tell you, it feels like we're building toward something again," Mr. Middleton said.

Kayla Winner-Connor, a graduate student in Los Angeles, said she was yed but not surprised by Wednesday's violence.

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"I hate to say that — everything we're hearing seems really extreme and it has been polarized for a while, but now it is dangerous," said Ms. Winner-Connor, who said she was not a supporter of Mr. Trump. She added, "His agenda feels so wrong and I feel an emotionally charged response, but this is spawning some extreme reactions."

Hope that the political system would self-correct seemed to compete with cynicism about the idea that things might even be salvageable. Kari Duma, 45, of Tucson, said she was skeptical that the country would hear Wednesday's gunshots as a "wake-up call."

"How many wake-up calls do we need?" she asked. "The thing is, people are not afraid to attack other people because of politics and beliefs."

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There is a long history of political bloodshed and assassination in the United States, sometimes carried out by ideological actors and at other times by people who are mentally unstable. Gunmen have killed four presidents and shot at several others, and killed Dr. King, Robert F. Kennedy and the pioneering gay politician Harvey Milk.

Mentally ill people have targeted members of Congress before, too, including Ms.

Giffords and Allard K. Lowenstein, a former antiwar activist who was murdered in his office. In 2003, a member of the New York City Council, James Davis, [was shot to death on the chamber's floor](#) by a political opponent.

The apparent violent turn in national politics, and the disappearance of traditional rules of civility, also come as mass shootings — usually targeting nonpolitical civilian targets, in schools and public places — are on the rise.

Some question the correlation between violence and political rhetoric, stressing that gunmen who attack political targets are often unstable or angry for unrelated reasons.

George Brauchler, a Colorado district attorney who prosecuted James Holmes, who killed 12 people in an Aurora movie theater in 2012, said he was inclined to view the gunman outside Washington on Wednesday chiefly as "evil."

"I don't know that politics facilitates that or if it's just an excuse for it," said Mr. Brauchler, a Republican who is running for governor. "It's not like, in the absence of a political issue, this guy would have lived a law-abiding life."

Among politicians and voters on Wednesday, there was at least a visceral link between the latest violence and a long-running disintegration of civic norms, which has left candidates and commentators freer than ever to stoke hateful impulses with little fear of consequences.

In 2011, the shooting of Ms. Giffords by a mentally ill assailant came during a convulsive political period, when a bitter debate over health care yielded a wave of threats against lawmakers. Sarah Palin, the former vice-presidential pick, drew sharp criticism for having posted a graphic online that showed cross hairs over the districts of several members of Congress, including Ms. Giffords, though no connection to the crime was

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showed cross hairs over the districts of several members of Congress, including Ms. Giffords — though no connection to the crime was established.

Mr. Trump has been an unabashed dabbler in provocative rhetoric, goading attendees at his rallies to rough up protesters, and [suggesting last summer](#) that “Second Amendment people” could take action if Hillary Clinton were elected. He was unapologetic during the campaign for comments that critics said verged on incitement.

But Mr. Trump has not had a monopoly on caustic language. Activists on the left have accused the president of “treason,” a crime that can carry a death sentence, and compared him to Hitler. The comedian Kathy Griffin recently apologized after posting a video in which she [brandished a prop version](#) of Mr. Trump’s bloody and severed head.

Frank Keating, who was the governor of Oklahoma when antigovernment militants bombed a federal building there in 1995, killing 168 people, said figures of public authority needed to be more sensitive to the impact of their words on “unstable people.”

“There are people that are right on the edge, partisans in both parties, that could — would — do terrible things if that trip wire is tripped,” said Mr. Keating, a Republican. “The rhetoric needs to come down about 17 notches.”

Voters on both sides of the political divide shared that sentiment. In New York City, Bill Ryan, 60, a Democrat who supported Mr. Trump, said the rhetoric of anger was getting “louder and louder.”

“It lights a fuse with these freaking fanatics who go out and start shooting people on a baseball field,” Mr. Ryan said.

Christine Quinn, the former speaker of the New York City Council, who witnessed the shooting there in 2003, said the guardrails around political behavior had vanished.

“You see presidential candidates, now the president of the United States, joking about violence,” said Ms. Quinn, a Democrat. “Clearly, we see evidence here that it’s reverberating on all sides, and the reality is that we have a tone now where there is no cap on it.”

Reporting was contributed by Luis Ferré-Sadurní, Jennifer Medina, Fernanda Santos and Matthew Teague.

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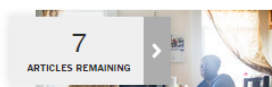


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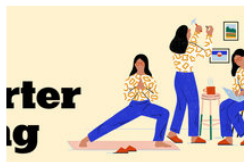
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